

Legislature keeps focus on controlling spending, cutting taxes

Over the past three years, we have successfully adopted and enacted reforms that address our primary objective of protecting taxpayers.

Among the major reforms we have adopted are budgets that have limited state spending and controlled the growth of government, tax cuts that have allowed Washingtonians to keep more of their own money, and changes in state rules and regulations that have made government operate more efficiently and effectively.

This session, we will pursue further measures to continue our progress in making government more accountable to taxpayers, including holding the line on state spending and steadfastly opposing any attempts to undo or weaken the I-601 spending limit.

In addition, we will continue fighting to allow people to keep more of their own hard-earned income by pursuing further tax relief, specifically a reduction in the "car tab tax" and further property tax reforms.

Legislature opposes gas tax increase

Despite the governor's call for a gas tax increase of up to 11 cents per gallon over the next five years, including future automatic gas tax increases based on population growth and inflation, Republicans in the Legislature do not believe a gas tax increase is necessary this year.

With a projected budget surplus of more than \$860 million, lawmakers may be able to fund transportation improvements with existing revenue, not a gas tax increase.

This session, we will instead pursue responsible policy changes in transportation to reduce excessive administrative and management costs, and find ways to most effectively use the funds the state already has in hand. In addition, we will work toward a reasonable and comprehensive plan that will solve the problems we face now, as well as provide a more stable funding source for transportation in the future.



Sen. Newhouse, as President Pro Tempore of the Senate presides with Speaker of the House Clyde Ballard over a joint session of the state Legislature.

Staying the course on welfare reform

The 1997 Legislature brought revolutionary changes to Washington's welfare system. For years, the public has called for work requirements and time limits on public assistance eligibility. In 1997, the Republican Legislature delivered a new WorkFirst program requiring able-bodied people to find jobs and start their way up the economic ladder. These people may rely on public assistance for only five years in their lifetime.

WorkFirst is working. Just two months after the first phase of changes took effect, the goal of moving 11.5 percent of welfare families off assistance by June 1999 had already nearly been achieved -- almost 18 months early! The number of families on welfare continues to drop steadily.

The Legislature will work with the state Department of Social and Health Services throughout the 1998 session to make sure the program continues to reach its goals and families new to the workforce have the resources they need to remain self-sufficient.

Cracking down on welfare fraud

Many anticipate the state's new time limits and work requirements will cut back on the urge to commit welfare fraud. During the 1998 session, we will strengthen laws and improve accountability to ensure that public assistance is not abused -- either by those who receive welfare or by groups who administer assistance. If you know someone you believe is committing welfare fraud, you may report them to the Department of Social and Health Services at 1-800-562-6906.

Promoting basic education and accountability in schools

The Legislature has an on going commitment to our children's education. Last session, we increased school spending to put more money in the classroom and placed a new emphasis on improving reading skills at the elementary level.

We also provided additional funding for technology-based education. The Grandview and Mabton School Districts may receive more than \$620,000 for their "Read and Record Success" program. To receive the money, they must provide a 25 percent local match. These districts expect to use their program to deliver a comprehensive reading and assessment program to students with economic, cultural, and academic barriers that could prevent them from meeting their reading requirements.

This session we will continue to focus on improving students' basic reading, mathematics, and science skills. Your 15th District team is committed to fulfilling this state's No. 1 responsibility by continuing to improve the quality of education for our children.



Rep. Lisk and Rep. Honeyford confer on the House floor over welfare reform legislation.

Taking steps to stop drunken driving

For the safety of our children and families, we must do everything we can to keep drunken drivers off the road. According to the Washington Traffic Safety Commission, 331 people were killed in alcohol-related traffic accidents last year.

During this session, we will consider measures to increase penalties for DUI offenses. These could include longer prison terms for DUI offenses, automatic license suspension on the first conviction, and vehicle impoundment. We may also require that DUI convictions stay on a defendant's record permanently. Another proposal would lower the legal limit for blood alcohol level from its current level of 0.10 to 0.08.

Criminal justice

Our recent successful effort to enact broad-based reforms in the juvenile justice system will require constant stewardship. We intend to monitor progress closely, and continue our work to prevent juvenile crime. Some of our unfinished business includes a bill sponsored by Rep. Honeyford that would expand the definition of public nuisance to include private homes that are being used for gang activity. The nuisance designation would allow an individual or the police to petition the court to shut down these houses.

We will also work to provide additional funding to cities and counties to enhance local criminal justice efforts.



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"Protecting Taxpayers, Re-shaping Government"
The 1998 Legislative Session Update

Protecting water rights

Over the summer, Washington received a dire warning from the federal government. With endangered species listings for the upper Columbia River steelhead and a threatened listing for Snake River steelhead, Washington citizens were given a taste of the tremendous changes our state could face unless we take steps to improve our fisheries management.

Last session, the Legislature passed a comprehensive watershed management bill to help local groups develop watershed plans to fit their individual needs. Unfortunately, the governor vetoed much of this bill.

Throughout the fall, a bipartisan group of legislators from the House and Senate have been meeting throughout the state, working with local interests to develop a new proposal. We will make sure this proposal protects existing water rights, involves all interested parties, and places equal emphasis on all parts of the salmon problem: hatcheries, harvest, hydro-electric, and habitat. Water is crucial to our valley and we must work hard to protect our rights.

Improving farm worker housing

Last session, the Legislature passed a bill giving growers an opportunity to build solid temporary housing for their seasonal workers without meeting the stringent code required for permanent housing structures. Unfortunately, Gov. Gary Locke vetoed this bill.

Growers we visited this summer were forced to abandon plans to provide organized work camps on their property and workers were left to fend for themselves, camping in parks, along roadsides, and in rock quarries with no safe water sources or cooking facilities.

The Legislature will revisit this issue during the 1998 session with hopes of coming to a workable agreement with the governor, growers, and the migrant worker community.

Addressing cattle and dairy problems

This summer, we invited the Senate Agriculture and Environment Committee to the district to discuss important issues before ranchers, feed lot owners, and dairy operators in the Yakima Valley.

These groups told us the state's branding program needs to make more efficient use of its funding and provide better services to ranchers and cattlemen. The Department of Agriculture has introduced a proposal to increase inspection fees for cattle ranchers 75 cents to 90 cents per head. The department says the increase will get their budget on track and allow them to provide additional services requested by the industry. We've directed the Agriculture Department to rework this proposal to reduce fees and alleviate the burden on ranchers.

In our tour of local dairy operations, we found dairy operators who demonstrated extensive efforts at managing their animal waste to prevent water pollution. Faced with the threat of lawsuits by environmental groups, we are working on new legislation to help better manage the state's dairy waste and protect cooperative dairy operators from costly litigation.

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Dear Friends,

Over the past three years, the Legislature has made great strides in re-shaping and re-focusing state government. Growth in state spending is at its lowest level in 25 years and has been held well below the limit established by Initiative 601. Massive tax increases passed in 1993 have been repealed and permanent limits have also been placed on state and local property taxes. Historic reforms have added accountability and personal responsibility to state agencies and programs, including the welfare and juvenile justice systems.

As we begin the 1998 legislative session, we will continue making dramatic changes in state government by working to make government more accountable to you, as a taxpayer, as well as more effective and efficient in delivering needed services.

This newsletter outlines many of the issues that will be at the forefront of the Legislature's agenda for the next two months in Olympia. Throughout the legislative session, we encourage you to contact our offices with your thoughts, ideas and opinions on these issues or other topics. Hearing from you helps us represent you more effectively.

Sincerely,

Irv Newhouse Barb Lisk Jim Honeyford